

*Joseph Nechvatal: Paintings 1986-1987*

*The Ghost of Electricity*

by Barry Blinderman

1988

From *Joseph Nechvatal: Paintings 1986-1987*, a catalogue  
for an exhibition of Joseph Nechvatal's computer-robotic assisted  
paintings that Barry Blinderman organized for the University Galleries  
at Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois in 1988



Installation view of *Joseph Nechvatal: Paintings 1986-1987*

"Is the next step in evolution to be the transformation of man into  
nothing more than electronic patterns?"  
- Alan Watts, *The Book*, 1966

Joseph Nechvatal's recent computer-robotic assisted paintings are eerie dot-matrix apparitions of technology's manifest destiny - the dissolution of boundaries through science. Man creates in his own image: the telephone, television and computer are literal projections of our perceptual and cognitive mechanisms. In effect, the

digital/electronics revolution has supplied us with a colossal external nervous system that has radically altered our concepts of space, simultaneity, and individuality. With an unprecedented saturation of hallucinatory imagery, the specular regime of television, film and photography transforms society into a phantasmagoria; removing us from the reality of the world while pretending to capture it. Technology, the great equalizer, has achieved through mass-media overload the erasure of difference: images of real horror are neutralized by their coexistence with game shows and liquor advertisements. TV is the most direct form of mind-to-mind communication, delivering the masses wholesale to the corporate sponsors.

"A certain amount of contempt for the material employed to express an idea is indispensable to the purest realization of this idea.' -Man Ray

Within the confines of a computer-efficient society, scathing visions poke through the glacier of sameness that has advanced upon us. Nechvatal's belief in technology's promised new channels of perception is tempered by his awareness of the accompanying threat of societal/nuclear disintegration. It is this paradox which lends his work its conceptual and political tension. His "paintings" are, in fact, executed by robotic arms spewing computer-commanded jets of red, yellow, blue and black pigment onto canvases up to twelve feet wide - using the same state of the art process which currently creates advertisement billboards.

Nechvatal's involvement with media imagery and production tools dates back to 1980, when he began exhibiting intimately scaled graphite drawings comprising saturated, interwoven line tracings of pictures culled from newspapers and magazines. Irrational juxtapositions of images and scale were submerged into an all-over abstract network.

He later produced photographically enlarged details of these drawings, onto which he sprayed bands or atmospheric areas of color. Photo-silk-screened images on canvas preceded his use of the computer to digitize, enlarge and ‘paint’ his current work.

“The forms of art are always preformed and meditated. The creative process is always an academic routine and sacred procedure. Everything is prescribed and proscribed. Only in this way is there no grasping or clinging to anything. Only a standard form can be imageless, only a stereotyped image can be formless, only a formulaized art can be formulaless.” - Ad Reinhardt, *Timeless in Asia*

Nechvatal’s working philosophy is akin to Ad Reinhardt’s embrace of Eastern concepts of vacuity, repetition and refinement - a quest to push substance to the verge of immateriality. As Reinhardt programmatically erased signs of individual gesture, working in series resembling production lines, Nechvatal distances his touch from the work long before it is digitized by computer and executed by robotic arms.

Nechvatal's work extends the dimensions of Reinhardt's existential Void through the metaphorical implications of electronic imagery. Ethereal impulses that are transmitted, received, and ultimately left to drift in the far reaches of space are likened to our transient corporeal presence in a continuum of being and non-being. Caught in a labyrinthine web of spectral resonance, images emerge and recede like impulses from the pool of the unconscious. The collective wreckage of history is washed ashore on laser-scanned waves. Altamira’s urgent talismans move among the shadows of Plato's cave, transforming into new mythologies whose heroes are yet unchosen.

“Today information moves fast, while meaning travels very slowly. The era of information makes less not more sense. But when the meaning of things is lost, when you no longer believe in structures and power, you find yourself in a spiritual state like in Zen, the satori experience, or in any mystical state where the world makes no sense whatever and where a more profound and universal meaning emerges.” -Joseph Nechvatal, *SUPERFACTS*, Spectacle: A Field Journal from Los Angeles: Number 4 (September 1985)

We receive a superabundance of information via scan-lines, whether on TV, computer screens, or color reproductions in magazines and billboards. It is fitting that Nechvatal should employ a technique calling attention to information processed line by line to magnify his subversive images to the scale of media. Realizing the degree to which electronic media has infiltrated our dreams and unconscious, he uses the robotic arm as an extension of his own hand, recycling media's detritus and projecting it in a new form before the viewer's eye and mind. The ebb and flow between visible and invisible, between presence and absence, in Nechvatal's computer-robotic assisted paintings suggests the desire to momentarily retrieve and redeem these fleeting images stripped of signification. Yet there is really nothing to clutch and no one to clutch it.